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“A Better-Informed Citizen of North America:” Environmental Memory and Frames of Justice in William T. Vollmann’s Transnational Metafiction

by C. Parker Krieg



Abstract

*This article proposes environmental memory as an approach to reframing environmental justice in transnational contexts through the work of U.S. author, William T. Vollmann. Combining recent theorizations of environmental memory with Nancy Fraser’s “politics of framing,” I argue that Vollmann reimagines the political spaces of social ecology in the twenty-first century by metafictionally dramatizing the various contexts, uses, limits, and possibilities of narrative. I focus on two novels, *The Ice-Shirt* (1990) and *Imperial* (2009), to illustrate how Vollmann constructs environmental memory as a challenge to the interpretive frame of the nation-state in an era of anthropogenic change. As with other contributions to this issue, the original occasion of this essay was for a publication following the 2014 symposium, “Rethinking Environmental Consciousness,” at Mid Sweden University. Since then, the intensification of borders and reactionary nationalisms under neoliberalism have made the reimagining of transnational connections even more urgent. As this reading contends, Vollmann’s profuse narratives do not begin to exhaust the possibilities of rewriting that history. Rather, they suggest a modest starting point.*

Keywords: environmental justice, globalization, memory, metafiction, William T. Vollmann



About the Author

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It is not only the substance of justice, but also the frame, which is in dispute.

—Nancy Fraser

Without a past, no matter how controvertible, the present cannot be anything other than a tumble through darkness towards the darkness which neither past nor present can illuminate.

—William T. Vollmann

Of the hundreds of footnotes in William T. Vollmann’s *Imperial*, a nonfiction novel set in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, one contains a quote on “infinity” from *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*: “The presence of a boundary or measure necessarily implies the possibility of exceeding it” (2009, 44). The ability to make a distinction means that one has already in some sense internalized what lies beyond the supposed distinction. In this Hegelian insight from an artifact of the now defunct USSR, one can perhaps hear echoes of Napoleon’s cannons. Theodor Adorno famously turns this idealistic “infinity” on its head. The force of his *Negative Dialectics* lies in what he calls “the preponderance of the object” (2003, 183). In other words, relations in the world are always in excess of the effort to grasp them with concepts, which we cannot do without. This necessity, Adorno argues, tasks us to work through the non-identical whose real movement is revealed in history. Vollmann’s plunge into history, as evidenced in his transnational and historiographic metafiction, stages a confrontation with the non-identity of the

past and the multiplicity of the present. In this essay, I argue that Vollmann's approach to history *reconstructs* the environmental memory of North America as the memory of a world already in excess of its borders and identities. He creates what philosopher Nancy Fraser (2009) refers to as "frames of justice" in his writing that foreground the political nature of the narrative act. This narrative framing, or what Vollmann calls "delineation," is a necessary third dimension that underlies, and is often excluded from, the discourses of recognition and redistribution (Fraser 2009, 145). It is a consciousness of the multiple frames that compose environmental justice.

William T. Vollmann (b. 1959) is known for his wildly prolific career. His novels are long, fragmented, and self-referential, and often international in scope (e.g., *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, *The Atlas*). He won the National Book Award in 2005 for *Europe Central* and has served as both war correspondent and travel writer, touted for his "post-tourist gaze" (Russell 2000, 156). Since the mid-1980s, Vollmann's work often rejects the apocalyptic moods that accompanied the postmodern moment, breathing new life into antifoundationalist tropes with a democratic sincerity. Combining playfulness, irony, and an appreciation of beauty with a sense of humility that indulges in masochistic exhibitionism, Vollmann's fictions expose the various gaps between intention and effect in a social terrain whose intransigence often tests the limits of individual agency and understanding.

Vollmann inhabits a post-textual universe, that is, a world that has always been both real and influenced by stories. The fidelity in Vollmann's writing to both the narrated and non-narrated world exhibits this "dual accountability" (Buell 1995, 91). By choosing a historiographic genre that contains "the intratextual, the intertextual (the world of other texts), the autorepresentational (the text figured as a text), and the outer mimetic (the world outside the text)," Vollmann intensifies the already complex array of literary reference in much environmental writing (Buell 1995, 93). As a surveyor of violence, abjection, and desire in the global economy, he situates knowledge first as an act *within* the world and second as a representation *of* the world. This pragmatist distinction informs both the ethical and epistemological project at the heart of his books. It supports the view that "the conventions of narrative in both historiography and novels are not constraints," but are rather the "enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making" (Hutcheon 1988, 121). Vollmann's consciousness of his embeddedness and complicity approaches an intensity that borders on the scientific, as if the endeavor to control the diverse array of references in the medium is an effort to master reality. This same impulse can also be read as an expression of fidelity to what exists, to the people and places out of which he composes his stories. It is the kind of fidelity needed if one is to discover how to properly betray it so that it might be transformed.

Turning to the political, Vollmann’s reconstruction of environmental memory re-maps the imaginaries of settler colonialism in the neoliberal era. The transnationalization of production and accumulation, what Fraser (2009) calls the “post-Westphalian order” that replaces the Keynesian state, has likewise produced a globalization of crises (e.g., climate, water, biodiversity). As micropolitical scales of desire become the model for entrepreneurial subjects, and culture becomes a resource to be managed along with its commodification, movements of international solidarity redraw the boundaries of political space. Writing in the *New Left Review*, Fraser (2009) argues that earlier conceptions of justice based on (economic) redistribution and (cultural) recognition struggled within the nation-state, but now a third dimension is needed: justice at the level of framing, or (political) representation. Whereas the first two dimensions focus on the “what” and the “who” of justice, the frame of representation focuses on the “how” (2009, 73). This “politics of framing” thus reconfigures the space itself. It draws attention to how political space, memory, and identification is made, asks what is included and excluded in that frame, and considers how those frames are deployed or articulated toward other ends. Similarly, by foregrounding his own narrative practices, Vollmann exposes the “delineations” of the past that served, and continue to serve, the interests of the powerful. “This book,” he writes, referring to *Imperial*, “represents my attempt to become a better-informed citizen of North America” (2009, 115). His attention to material history creates an environmental memory out of conflictual and hybrid pasts, now obscured by the hardening of borders and identities under neoliberalism.

Vollmann is hardly the first US author to concern himself with redefining America. Henry James took up similar “infinite” labors of understanding Americans in the world through novel writing. “The art of representation bristles with questions the very terms of which are difficult to apply and to appreciate,” James writes, “but whatever makes it arduous makes it, for our refreshment, infinite, causes the practice of it, with experience to spread round us in a widening, not narrowing circle” (1986, 35). This expanded art also expands the moral, ethical, and political imaginations of readers. Richard Rorty, for instance, argues that telling “sad stories in the public sphere” is necessary for reconsidering justice “as a larger loyalty” (1998, 45). Suggesting that beauty also has work to do, Elaine Scarry cites a passage from Homer in which, “the beautiful thing fills the mind and breaks all frames that give the ‘never before in the history of the world’ feeling;” it follows that the sense of “unprecedentedness” that beauty evokes can likewise suspend an entire state of affairs (1999, 23). Alternately, Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” draws on revulsion at Odysseus’ execution of slave girls *as property*, which prefigures contemporary revulsion over the treatment of other species as property

(1989, 201). By posing new senses and solidarities, literature can broaden frames of reference beyond current institutional arrangements. It does so by reframing perspectives, and by exposing the enabling fictions that maintain the present order. In what follows, I outline the concept of environmental memory and suggest that it serves as a “frame of justice” in two Vollmann texts: *The Ice-Shirt* and *Imperial*.

The concept of environmental memory has been, as Lawrence Buell observes, “used and abused” (2014b, 31). Memory is often considered more authentic and closer to lived experience than history, yet both memory and its interiority are made possible by technical objects such as writing, images, and tools (Stiegler 1998). As the accumulation of mediated encounters transmitted beyond its origin, environmental memory is a prosthetic invention, subject to its own discursive habits of selection and historical transmission. The history of this transmission can be understood by taking a “cultural memory approach,” as Axel Goodbody suggests, to examine how narratives reconstruct past social relationships with nature and place (2011, 55). Responding to Ursula Heise’s critique of place-based identity and consciousness in her book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Goodbody considers geographic realities as “symbolic entities,” both “remembered and imagined,” that “play a central role in subject constitution, and serve crucial political, social, and cultural functions” (2011, 57). Guarding against the myopic particularism of the local and the false universality of the global, these recompositions of the past rewrite previously unquestioned spatial identifications in ways that expand ethics and politics to include those who were previously viewed as not belonging or worthy of consideration. Such exclusion is based on “misframing” that constitutes a “meta-injustice” as it informs subsequent action (Fraser 2009, 144). Critics can redress such exclusions by examining texts that foreground “authorial strategies of representation and construction” in the process of reconstructing cultural memory:

Memories are not stores of complete sets of sense data, but consist rather of fragments of experience . . . which must be reactivated in processes linking them up into coherent patterns of information. This process of “re-membering” the raw experiential data explains why memories are subjective and context-dependent, and why they often tell us as much about the present needs and desires of the remembering subject as they do about the past. (Goodbody 2011, 58)

In other words, memory is a compositional process that binds disparate elements of information and experience into meaningful patterns that are part of the larger movement of subject formation within a historical context. This definition of cultural

memory supports Buell’s account, which is not limited to individual experience or medium. Instead, Buell’s environmental memory is defined by its production and uses across multiple time-scales. These scales include: the *biogeological*, which frames human life-spans and meaning within planetary ecological time; the *personal*, defined by individual experience of places; the *social/collective*, that is, narratives that relate people to their generational and intergenerational experience in their environs; and finally, the *national*, which draws on Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” of circulating media whose timescale emerges with its sense of shared identity and relation to place as political territory (Buell 2014b, 33). Rather than reducing environmental memory to any one particular scale, the focus is on the diverse social processes that go into memory formation and temporal experience. When faced with such discontinuous terrains, the “activity of narrative” becomes the production site of “coherent temporal ensembles: in order to configure time” in its movement (Virilio 1991, 103).

Memory is understood here as an act of narrative framing with the capability of composing new subjects and new histories. Just as Rorty argues that “the principle backup for historiography is not philosophy but the arts,” the role of the artist is to actively compose new frames of understanding (1991, 200). As a genre that consciously foregrounds its own narrative conventions as an element of the history it interrogates, historiographic metafiction is ideal for explicitly reconfiguring the differing timescales that compose environmental memory, and the political frames that memory serves. While this mode of writing “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining,” Hutcheon warns that “in so doing it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (1988, 89). It carries a certain danger, the danger of the political. Rather than accepting history as given it explores the empirical construction of that history, the retroactive creation of memory, and auto-ascription of social meaning. Vollmann expands the environmental identifications of contemporary subjects by recapitulating Goodbody’s process of “re-membling” in the provisional and contingent nature of his metafiction.

Environmental Memory and *The Ice-Shirt*

The Ice-Shirt is the first of seven novels in Vollmann’s as yet unfinished project, *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landscapes*. He began writing it after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US and Canada in 1988, and two volumes were published by the signing of NAFTA in 1993. The economic integration of the continent is the occasion for re-imagining its cultural and environmental history, yet it takes on additional meaning in the Anthropocene. *The Ice-Shirt* (1990) tells the story of

the “coming of the frost” to North America, a material and environmental allegory of violent competition over resources. Inspired by medieval Icelandic manuscripts like the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, the novel rewrites the thirteenth-century *Grænlandinga saga* [*Saga of the Greenlanders*] and *Eiríks saga rauða* [*Erik the Red's Saga*], adding imaginative detail to the Norse “discovery” of America and their interactions with the indigenous “Skraelings” in the late tenth century. Vollmann’s retelling combines the family sagas with the mythology and oral traditions of the Greenlandic Inuit and Newfoundland Mi’kmaq. It is a hybrid of history and fiction, contemporary travel writing and speculative ecology, in which a cacophony of physical, spiritual, and human agencies come into conflict and anthropogenically inaugurate the “little ice age” of the thirteenth century.

In the recent wave of globalization, the rewriting of North America has been taken up by visionary writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Karen Yamashita. Yet Vollmann’s “septet of novels on the (dis)arrangement of North America over the thousand-year period of Eurosettler-Native contact,” as Buell puts it, “qualifies as the hands-down boldest attempt ever launched at fictionally historicizing the whole trajectory of modern American ‘civilization’ from first contact to the near present” (2014a, 457). Each novel in this “disarrangement” depicts a different moment (terrain) of conflict and exchange between the indigenous inhabitants of what is now called North America and people of European descent. These clashes are semiotic and material, and are as much over land itself as over the social aspirations the land represents. The goal of *Seven Dreams* “has been to create a ‘Symbolic History’—that is to say, an account of origins and metamorphoses . . . whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth” (Vollmann 1990, 397). This symbolic history speaks to the continuities that define North America’s inhabitants as the inheritors of these struggles in the present.

The Ice-Shirt is not altogether different from the sagas it re-imagines. “The blending of truth and fiction in *The Ice-Shirt*,” argues Peter Christiansen, “continues the tradition of the sagas themselves” (1996, 53). Christiansen sees Vollmann “updating Icelandic traditions” in that the saga manuscripts, being themselves a series of reproductions with little claim to an original source beyond question, pre-date modern distinctions between fact and fiction familiar to the conventions of realism (56). While medieval Icelanders had notions of truth and falsehood, they also had synthetic forms of truth when contrasted with post-Enlightenment divisions between natural objectivity and cultural subjectivity. Just as environmental historians today attempt to fill out their history by turning to hybrid texts like the sagas, they—like the writers of the sagas themselves—are involved in a creative project, producing narrative knowledge out of disparate sources. When Vollmann disrupts his narrative with references to particular

saga manuscripts and openly considers his authorial decisions within the text, he challenges the truth claims of received history. At the same time he includes the reader in a similar project of reconstructing and reframing the sagas and North American history.

Larry McCaffery observes that *The Ice-Shirt*’s “elaborate series of source notes and footnotes” include “discussions about [Vollmann’s] intentions in employing his sources and correspondence with experts in the field who comment on (and occasionally disagree with) specific interpretations” (2004, xxiv). Introducing contingency in his telling of the story through the internal author, “William the Blind,” is also a way of introducing contingency into the past itself, which may not coincide with the reader’s imagination of that past. Different manuscript accounts—e.g., *Islendingabók* (Vollmann 1990, 123), *Hauksbók* (154), *Speculum Regale* (176)—contain alternative details of events and place descriptions. Add to this William the Blind’s dabbling in Mi’kmaq orthography and mythology of shapeshifters, and Vollmann not only challenges the image of a settled past, but undoes the very notion of stable beings and the correspondence of language with the world. Realistic passages sometimes include badly drawn illustrations of flowers and artifacts (e.g., Freydis’ bone comb), to remind the reader that the written word is yet another variety of badly drawn reality. Illustrated maps include explanatory notes like, “A highly unreliable sketch-map of places mentioned in the sketch-map of this sketch-map,” and trace anachronistic modes of travel: “Seth Pilsk (by Boeing 747)” and “Freydis Eiriksdottir (by Ship)” (Vollmann 1990, 206). One of the central themes of *Seven Dreams* is that geographical environments are a palimpsest of imagination, technology, and power.

William the Blind’s version of the Vinland sagas highlights Freydis Eiriksdottir, a figure often maligned for murdering other colonists and fighting “Skraelings” by slapping her naked breasts with a sword. Freydis is granted an interiority and motivation that is previously absent as she becomes the primary human agent of the “coming of the frost.” Her mysterious pregnancy, which appears in only one of the original sagas, is explained by her love/hate relationship with demonic glacier beings, Blue-Shirt and Amortortak, as well as by her seduction of the mythical Mi’kmaq hero, Kluskap. “What do you really want?” Kluskap asks her, “I want to be rich,” she replies. After he recalls the timber, game, grapes, and skins that her people have enriched themselves with—even offering to smooth things out with his people over her murders—Kluskap asks what more she could want: “I want *everything*” (Vollmann 1990, 260). He implants the Frost-Seed in her, marking the passage from coldness as a physical agency of nature to an affective relation that circulates among humans within the landscape.

This “exchange” between Nordic woman and Mi’kmaq hero is followed by Freydis’ dream in which various personified earthly forces across the North Atlantic do battle: Kluskap; the Mountain; the Hill; Blue-Shirt’s sea trolls; EARTHQUAKE; COOLPUJOT—the Power of the seasons; Sun; and finally, AMORTORTAK, who attempts to remove Kluskap’s shirt so that “the Plant People and Animal People would fade and die and Vinland would become a dull grey rock of lifeless neutrality, which he could then clothe in the Ice-Shirt” (Vollmann 1990, 273). By personifying geophysical forces with names drawn from would-be European colonial settlers and indigenous North Americans, the narrator is able to “explain” an otherwise massively distributed climatic process in anthropogenic terms. Were this written later, Vollmann might have included an Indonesian volcano named *Lombok*, to whose eruption in 1257 CE geologists now attribute the drop in temperatures across the North Atlantic (Lavigne et al. 2013). While this imaginative explanation does not reduce the coming of the frost to any singular act or natural occurrence, the asymmetrical responsibility lies with the Nordic Greenlanders, since Freydis’ intercourse with spirits of both Indigenous and Icelandic tradition initiates the “little ice age.”

Freydis embodies the economic drive of transnational expansion and the acquisitive relation to place that pervades the lives of the characters. For example, Thorvald spends his final moments with his son discussing the economic prospects of Breidafjord. “This place will not bring any profit to you,” he tells Eirik, “When I die let the glacier creep down over this house.” This exchange is followed immediately by a quote from a 1987 Iceland Vacation Planner brochure. It reads: “We’re Rich in Viking Heritage, We’re Uncommon Good Fun and . . . We’re Very Affordable” (Vollman 1990, 61). A section epigraph from Thoreau’s *Walden* reminds readers that coldness is not simply a natural fact, but also a social relation: “The poor man is wont to complain that this is a cold world, and to cold, no less physical than social, we refer directly a great part of our ills” (328). In other words, to the poor person coldness is experienced as a social relation as much as an absolute condition. Just as Adorno would use “coldness” to characterize the affect of bourgeois morality, in Vollmann, the metaphorical slippage of coldness between ecological and social landscapes suggest that capitalist rationality returns a mutable humanity to a “state of nature.”

Environmental memory is bound up with economic rationality, as we see in the forty-year period (ca. 1010–1050 CE) in which timber scarcity in Greenland is supplemented by violent Vinland harvests (Vollmann 1990, 330). In one passage, a visitor to L’Anse-aux-Meadows, Newfoundland, in 1987, describes its mossy, peaceful ruins in a treeless landscape, where unidentified bones lay under slabs, close to the surface. “The sun in late afternoon best illuminates thoughts which are melancholy,”

the visitor observes, "What takes root on this great cold plain of historical remembrance, with its snowdrifts and cold hard outcroppings . . . Nothing but trees grown bad and grey; and seagulls, icebergs, half-dead grass. The rest is buried or blown away" (337). The deforested land now seems to bear little capable of supporting either memory or history. This stark landscape bears the evidence of past environmental exploitation to the extent that it threatens even the memory of having ever occurred.

As *The Ice-Shirt* demonstrates, environmental memory is not just something "outside" culture, but is profoundly social and carried through material culture. William the Blind's reference to *Flateyjarbók*, the urtext of *The Ice-Shirt*, as "that poor dead bundle of a hundred and thirteen calfskins," evokes the materiality of environmental memory as it is fashioned out of other beings (Vollmann 1990, 10). If environmental memory is constitutively bound up with melancholy, a mood that comes from being unable to properly mourn for the lost object, perhaps because it is not completely lost. "Do we carry our landscapes with us locked in our ice-hearts," his narrator asks, "and can we fit them over what was there just as we can clothe ourselves forever in the stiff and crackling cloaks that lie in the churchyard permafrost at Herjolfsness?" (340). Here, the complex metaphor refers to a Greenland settlement that contains an archive of preserved clothing that *survives* because it has been re-fashioned into burial shrouds. As the transformation of the material into the metaphorical (and back) across time, environmental memory might also be described as the act of "carrying our landscapes with us," that is, as internalized responses to past environments carried into new terrains through the technics of narrative. However, these lived attachments to material places and objects can just as easily become death shrouds if they are meant to preserve an unchanging subject. In this way, Vollmann's fiction asserts the prosthetic nature, whether textual or textile, of memory.

Imperial's Frames of Justice

If *Seven Dreams* is historiographic metafiction that reframes the "symbolic history" of North America, *Imperial* is metafictional historiography that exposes the politics of frame-making. Ostensibly a nonfiction novel, *Imperial* attempts to represent the *entity*—the spatial, temporal, geographical, peopled, racialized, farmed, financialized, irrigated, polluted, diverted, policed, bordered, militarized, and undocumented, entity—known as Imperial Valley, California: the "continuum between Mexico and America" (Vollmann 2009, 1116). It is as much about the agricultural and labor history of the valley, and the border cities of Mexicali and Calexico, as it is about Vollmann's efforts to tell its story. At over 1300 pages, this encyclopedic novel *reads* at the very limits of

narrative itself. It is a fragmented and halting assemblage of post-natural nature writing, interviews, ethnography, photographs, and short stories, shot through with legal documents, disembodied quotations, and archival ingenuity that builds a composite mosaic of past and present. Vollmann's reconstruction of Imperial's history explores how societies and environments condition one another, and *how* the memory of that conditioning is carried.

Imperial begins as an attempt to tell the story of migrant farm workers seasonally smuggling themselves back and forth across the border, but sprawls into a textual monument that threatens to undo itself with each additional vignette and chapter. The central problem of the novel is established in a section titled "Delineations." After having documented the militarization, violence (both slow and fast), and agricultural pollution that spatially delineates Imperial valley, Vollmann turns his attention to the political and aesthetic implications of *Imperial*, the book. He describes Imperial as "an entity invisible everywhere except in its representations, whose substance is comprised of equal parts imagination, measurement, memory, authority and jurisdiction!" "Delineation," he continues, "is the merest, absurdist fiction, yet delineation engenders control" (2009, 44). This calls the project of *Imperial* into question, and invites the reader's suspicion of any easy claim to innocence that might be found in its pages.

Because the book is in part a compilation of the ways the valley has been framed in order to exploit it in the past, Vollmann includes himself within that genealogy. Like the valley, the book *Imperial* can also be said to be "invisible everywhere except in its representations," in that the documentary realism of nonfiction often strives for transparency. It is not until it is represented as such that the writing becomes visible as writing, that is, situated, enmeshed, or mutually determined in some way by what it is attempting to describe. Vollmann relies on past descriptions and not-so-subtly integrates them into the main text, often italicized, as he does in one of many water-related examples. "A century earlier," he writes, "it had been like this . . ." as the narration enters a passage lifted from a 1902 letter published in the Santa Ana Herald:

The contrast was noticeable. North of this imaginary line were modern structures, stores, shops and the commodious offices of the Imperial Water company, with vegetation on all sides, while on the south of it the eye rested upon a few Indian brush teepees scattered among the mesquite bushes that spread over a vast desert beyond. And before that, of course, all this had been Mexico. (Vollmann 2009, 42)

Recognized as an “imaginary line” in the past, the border is understood as a delineating instrument for producing environmental differences instead of organizing already distinct social entities according to a naturalized geopolitical territory. The border produces an appearance of causality, in that differences of development are seen as the cause of the border rather than an effect of the border. The Imperial Water Company did not settle there because the ground was already lush. The lushness in the otherwise dry terrain is the result of irrigation brought by Imperial Water that diverts water north of the border before it continues south to Mexico proper. This delineation rests on the even earlier brutal delineations of the fifteenth through eighteenth century under New Spain. After quoting a sixteenth-century Spanish judge who plotted the destruction of indigenous societies through land policy, Vollmann (2009) wants his readers “to understand the role which delineation plays in all this—or redelineation, I should say, for doubtless each Indian pueblo had its own shape before it gets enclosed, transected, shattered” (192). “How could the results of redelineation be any different,” he asks, implicating his own writing (193). Vollmann understands the critical role of artistic production in the deterritorializing and reterritorializing activity of all societies, and is attentive to the acceleration of this movement in capitalist modernization.

Linking artistic production with possession, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify the artist as the primary agent of territorialization, be it pueblo society or imperial Spain. “The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive,” they write: “expressive qualities, or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. Not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 316). This passage describes the production of environmental memory as an appropriation of territory, based on delineation. If reterritorialization is implicit in the act of writing, itself an invention of despotic rule, one could argue that a transparent despot is no better, and that even where Vollmann includes other voices, they are still being appropriated by his own imagination. Understanding such expression as a subjective act of possessing a situation or arrangement also means accepting a certain responsibility for it. It recasts the modernist struggle with the limits of the medium as an allegorical struggle with a difficult history. This supports José David Saldívar’s observation that “if modernism in Latin America thought of itself as ‘exuberant’ cultural production (albeit with ‘deficient’ modernization), postmodernism in the US-Mexico borderlands thinks of itself as an alternative and a renewal” (1997, 32). Thus, in striving to be a “better-informed citizen of North America,” Vollmann’s re-writing of Imperial

illustrates the sheer variety of ways of renewing and remembering, of organizing historical and environmental knowledge, that he undoes from within, the possibility of a final frame on which unquestioned authority may rest.

Vollmann experiments by writing *Imperial* from different genres and disciplines. There is the xenophobic noir of the border guard who detains him. He impersonates Flaubert to write the story of his friend, Maria, a well-educated woman from Mexico who now performs manual labor in the US. And there is John Steinbeck's naturalist take on recent confluences of agriculture, racialized labor, and high finance in California. These perspectives allow him to try on different generic possibilities, to explore how fiction adds an element of truth to daily life, and to test the literary traditions that might claim *Imperial* as their heir. These experiments evoke the language of science. "When a scientist embarks on a series of experiments . . . it is likely that most of them will 'fail,'" he writes, "reality being more complicated than even the most torturous assertion." "In this respect," he continues, "writing is more like science than the other arts . . . because we can replace one word by another as many times as we like . . . whereas I have only so many chances to paint over my bad oil painting before it turns into a sticky brick" (2009, 176). *Imperial* weighs as much as a brick, and it is sticky in that one cannot easily pull out or isolate one part without dragging the rest with it. The sheer excess of *Imperial*, like empire itself, threatens to overwhelm the reader's ability to make it cohere.

To alleviate this, Vollmann builds a "metadata" archive of phrases, sayings, quotes, references, and verbal images, drawn from his fragmentary vignettes and chapters, which become an environmental memory for the reader. The "Preface," which appears in chapter 10, opens with an epigraph from the *Salton Sea Atlas*: "The concept of metadata—or data about data—which describes source, method, and appropriate uses . . . is a growing priority" (2009, 158). Through recurring sections titled "Imperial: Reprise," he compiles repeated phrases like "WATER IS HERE," "*I think we all feel sorry for 'em,*" and "The Desert Disappears," that evoke smaller narratives. Each phrase is a verbal short-hand to mobilize clusters of environmental, historical, and emotional experience. Vollmann is then able to consolidate "Imperial" at a higher level by playing these phrases off each other in subsequent iterations of the reprise. As these disparate references develop a coherence, the text performs the act of memory creation described above by Goodbody. Environmental memories, like other types of memory, are never complete, but "consist rather of fragments of experience . . . which must be reactivated in processes linking them up into coherent patterns of information" (Goodbody 2011, 58). Making this process explicit is Vollmann's way of doing justice to the *story* of

Imperial, and of North America. It is a story that could appear radically different if framed by other people, and yet would still remain incomplete.

Conclusion

As Vollmann consolidates his experience and research into an archive of Imperial Valley, his metafictional historiography leaves readers multiple frames of environmental memory with which to contend. If Fraser is correct that most political imaginaries remain "preoccupied with first-order issues of distribution and/or recognition," and have "so far failed to develop conceptual resources for reflecting on the meta-issue of the frame," then Vollmann usefully draws attention to the narrative act of framing, and to the materiality of ecological and economic relationships that *already* exist beyond the borders of the state (2009, 72). This joins efforts by scholar-activists like Ariel Salleh to expand left-environmentalism to include the embodied materialism of female labor in the southern hemisphere, or Andrew Ross' work on climate debt following the 2008 financial crisis. Each expands the frame to consider how power, exploitation, and agency are constituted through environmental means. The excessiveness of these novels may be taken as evidence that many experiences and memories have yet to be included in the public frame. Here, Vollmann's self-description as a "citizen of North America" highlights a generative contradiction. His status as a citizen implies democratic participation in a state, yet the existing institutions, like his writing, fail to contain the multitude of democratic and constituent powers that populate the continent. He is a citizen of an entity already in excess of its "badly-drawn" boundaries.

The ecocritical belief that literature can be at the forefront of confronting issues of scale is supported by works that mobilize personal, biogeological, and collective narratives within contested national traditions. Environmental memory can thus become a conceptual resource for redressing economic and cultural injustices within the state and beyond. If the literature of globalization too often leaps to sublime planetary processes that seemingly have no discernible agent or structuring antagonism, what follows is often an equally abstract and idealistic politics. By thematizing the failure of his romantic tendencies, Vollmann does not strive for total knowledge but to be "better informed," and so avoids the disappointment and cynicism that supposedly animate critical practices. Works like *The Ice-Shirt* and *Imperial* place readers in the difficult middle ground, using postmodern techniques that previous generations of politically committed writers and critics wrote off, perhaps rightly, as an exhaustion with social reality. However, this metafiction pays greater attention to that reality, and reframes economy and culture with a memory of the environments that make both possible.

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